

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 466

CS 203 686

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TITLE Playing, Experiencing, and Growing in Language Arts.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on Language Arts in the Elementary School (9th, Phoenix, Arizona, April 22-24, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Development; Concept Formation; Curriculum Design; *Early Childhood Education; *Early Experience; Language Arts; *Language Development; *Learning Readiness; *Play; Sensory Experience

ABSTRACT

This paper stresses the essential role of concrete play experiences in the early childhood curriculum. The paper examines the value of play, shows how to facilitate language arts development through planned play activities, notes that play provides the early sensory experiences that are the foundations for language arts development, points out the importance of exposing children to a great variety of environmental stimuli, and discusses concept development in young children. It emphasizes that varied play experiences are necessary for creating the experiential background that prepares young children to deal with abstractions and with the symbols of reading and writing. (GW)

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PLAYING, EXPERIENCING, AND GROWING IN LANGUAGE ARTS

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The importance of early experiences for total development in language arts is recognized by educators, psychologists, and parents. Because of a number of social forces such as the long-standing exploitation of early childhood education for getting young children ready for kindergarten or first grade, the phenomenon of knowledge explosion, Sputnik, accountability, and the anxiety of parents about "academic skills," we are faced with differing views of which methodologies, teaching techniques, and theories of learning should be the basis for early language experiences.

When development in language arts is defined as only reading or academic learning, play experiences are often excluded from the early childhood curriculum. It is alarming to see that teaching of a specific academic skill, such as reading in the early childhood program, takes precedence over the development of the "whole child." Children must have the opportunity to learn through concrete experiences before they can be expected to learn from reading books. Children are not ready to cope with the abstractions and symbols of reading and writing until they have that readiness which comes from many varied play experiences. This readiness will come through the manipulation of play materials and things in the child's social and physical world.

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We need to remember that children need to play and provide for this activity in whatever educational approach we happen to select. A child's play helps him to explore, experiment, and learn. Play serves a nonverbal mode of communication which satisfies a need of expression for young children. Many current educators credit play as being the most complete educational process because it influences the intellect, emotions, and body of the child.

According to Sponsellar and others, the value of play does not lie in any one specific set of structured "play" methods to teach specific skills. Play is valuable to the young learner primarily as a medium of development. The word medium can be defined in several ways. 1) A medium may be defined as a means of affecting or conveying something. Play is often the means by which the child's thoughts, ideas, and feelings are expressed. Since the young child is less able to use "internal" language as a means of conveying and understanding the complexity of his thoughts and feelings, the play medium provides a means of effecting his learning to himself. 2) A medium is also defined as a channel of communication. Play often provides the channel by which thoughts and feelings are communicated to others. Many of the misconceptions of the child's understandings are made clear to adults through observations of play activities and the complexities of the child's learning are communicated through the channel of play. 3) A medium is a material or

technical means of active expression. Play seems to be used by children as a technical means of actively expressing learning. Exploring a material from perspectives, finding out all the things which can be done with an object, and playing out different ways to deal with a social situation all provide means of active expression for learning. Therefore, play can be defined as a medium through which growth in the language arts occurs. If we become serious about play as a medium for growth in the language arts, we need to ask, "How can educators facilitate language arts development through play?"

This can be done by arranging play settings that encourage the reenactment of new experiences and their associated new words. When children have visited a zoo, a farm, or a fire station, it is likely that the trip will be reenacted through dramatic play if objects of the visit are available in the play setting. If photographs or similar pictures of the places visited are posted, children will continue to talk and play through these experiences and, in the process, will add new words to their vocabulary. By introducing new objects into the play area, teachers can ensure children's exposure to new vocabulary. Children's participation in sociodramatic play puts intensive demands on their language abilities and at the same time motivates them to become more exacting in their use of language. They must verbally influence their playmates if their ideas

are to be included in the play activity; so, children must work at learning how to express themselves effectively.

The making of signs, labels, and other written materials can become an integral part of many play experiences. Writing gives authenticity to children's play because written language overflows in the real world. Even very young children can sharpen their visual discrimination skills within the context of play. By interjecting props such as play money, price tags, and rubber stamps into their play, children will naturally examine and sort them according to their likenesses and differences. The situations that arise during play may present further opportunities for considering time sequences and written communication. A wide variety of dramatic play is possible from the art table to the sandbox and housekeeping center where children pretend, talk, and put out make believe biscuits.

Many children who cannot express themselves well in language can find an outlet for their ideas and feelings through play activities. They may not be able to talk about what happened on a field trip, but they may be able to build something they saw while playing with blocks. They may not be able to tell much about a pet duck brought to school, but they may be able to walk and quack like one. Praise for these play expressions will give a child a feeling of security and belonging and will enable him to later venture a few words when he finds himself capable of doing so.

One of the most powerful characteristics of play activities is the amount of novelty which can be generated. If play activities are properly developed, the child cannot only be exposed to a wide variety of stimuli but can generate tremendous variety of combinations, problems, and solutions. Play can provide an opportunity for the child to experiment with words, to learn the importance of his or her own ideas, to be curious, and to explore. Play provides language opportunities for the child which no other aspect of life can equal.

Play provides the opportunity for the necessary early sensory experiences which are the foundations for language arts development. In play, the child is mobile. The more ground the child covers the greater the opportunities for increased direct experiences with people and things in the environment. Therefore, the child has more to talk about. Children's talk should be based on solid, real, and lived through experiences. If development in the language arts is to be efficient and rewarding, it is necessary for knowledge to be based on previous more basic information.

The child develops skills in the language arts as he or she participates in various play experiences and activities. One play activity can contribute to growth in all the areas of language. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are interrelated and these skills are developed as the child participates in a variety of

activities throughout the day. Almost everything humans do becomes a vital and worthwhile learning experience. This is very true in the early years when everything is so new and exciting.

Researchers have found that a great amount of learning occurs both intentionally and unintentionally during the first years of life. However, the more intentional this learning becomes, the better will be the child's experiences and the more functional his concepts will become. This requires a cooperative effort on the part of the adult and child. As the adult becomes more aware of the nature of language development in the early years and the type of play experiences which are most effective in fostering it, the child's language abilities grow.

Within limits, research has shown that young children do not need specific instruction in how to experience their world so much as they need the opportunity to test, practice, and elaborate the skills they develop naturally through maturation and play experience. New skills, no matter how naturally they are acquired, need practice to improve them and to make them more functional. For example, the human senses develop naturally and, perhaps because of this fact, they are too often taken for granted; it is rarely recognized that our senses need exercise and practice as much as our bodies.

We live in a verbally oriented society; so, much of our learning is based upon the language arts and, unfortunately, so little of it is based on actual experience. It is very important for early experiences to deal directly with actual manipulation and exploration of the child's environment. The hierarchy of development is like a cone of which sensory experience forms the foundation. Sometimes adults want to begin at the other end of the cone and set up group experiences wherein the children are supposed to discuss planting seeds or thinking about what will sink and float before they have been exposed to the experience itself. This means that children are expected to use words that have few actual associations for them and to talk about something vague and relatively meaningless. It is much more useful to provide the opportunity to live through the experience and to talk about what is happening while it is going on as well as after it has been completed.

Children cannot be exposed to every experience. However, it is possible to expose them to a great variety of environmental stimuli, and there is every indication that this variety in experience is the most valuable thing an adult can provide a child. It is through these varied experiences that language and thought are given meaning. The more concrete experiences that back up every word and mental image, the richer the base will be on which the child has to build. When a child learns a new word, he or she is learning a

concept that might represent thousands of separate experiences. It is the cumulative significance of these experiences that gives a word or concept its meaning; this is constantly changing and is re-interpreted as the child adds new experiential evidence.

The society puts tremendous emphasis on the acquisition of a large vocabulary in young children. Few realize that words without play experiences are meaningless -- they are but empty concepts. Language is nonsense without meaning. The more experience and meaning that back up words, the more rewarding the communication process will become. Meaning cannot be taken for granted, for it is the substance of all development. Some children will have deeper and richer meanings attached to verbal symbols than others, depending upon their play experiences with the environment. Meaning is a reflection and facilitator of experience.

The younger the child, the more important are the firsthand aspects of his learning as he acquires informational background through using his hands, feet, and all of his senses. On the basis of many real life play experiences, the child builds a stock of information that enables him to interpret vicarious sources of knowledge such as picture books or the stories he hears. In connection with both his real and vicarious experiences, there must be discussion and exploration that bring out the meanings in the objects and situations that have come to his attention. Therefore, concepts grow,

the child acquires a vocabulary, and he learns to understand and use sentences effectively. Experiences, whether actual or secondhand, require interpretation through language if they are to be accurate and fully understood.

The development of concepts to which symbols of communication can be attached is important in the language arts development of young children. If the child's experience has given him meaning for the words he hears, he can react to them with his mind. If the way the words are put together in sentences and units of thought are familiar to him, he can react to them with meaning. Play experiences should deal with a great variety of things, e.g., colorful things and things of different shapes, sizes, and textures. All the play experiences of the day can be utilized toward expanding the child's ability in language arts if the adult is aware of the opportunities. Children acquire the knowledge of many words and how to use them with proficiency, through rich and varied experiences, as a source of vocabulary growth.

A child's word power depends on the types of association he or she has with words. To build rich vocabularies, children must have many opportunities for listening, talking, and thinking about ideas which words represent. The young child of today needs many words to be able to talk about the complex world in which he lives. The teacher

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must reinforce each experience with many play activities designed to make each word meaningful.

The raw materials of thinking, imagination, and growth in the language arts are developed through playing and experiencing.

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